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SUBJECT: GVN CONSERVATIVES LIVID OVER CONGENOFF STOP AT NUNS DEMONSTRATION

REF: HCMC WEEKLY MARCH 21, 2008

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The External Relations Office (ERO) in HCMC summoned A/CG and HRS Chief to protest HRS Chief's brief interaction on March 17 with a group of nuns holding a vigil in front of a disputed building site. We responded that the visit, made to follow-up a report that a nun had been roughed up at the site earlier, was purely informational and did not indicate any direct U.S. involvement in the protest. ERO emphasized that some within the GVN's top leadership -- extremely wary of the United States -- are predisposed to attach tremendous symbolic importance to such small matters. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On March 27, HCMC ERO Deputy Director Nguyen Vu Tu summoned A/CG and HRS Chief to formally protest the latter's brief stop at a demonstration by a group of Catholic nuns in front of a building site on March 17 (Reftel). After showing a video of HRS Chief and a ConGen vehicle at the site, Tu stated that the GVN viewed this as "interference in Vietnam's internal affairs" and a violation of Article 55 of the Geneva Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Going to the site in an official vehicle, stopping, and talking to the nuns, was viewed by conservative elements "at the top" in both Hanoi and HCMC as evidence that some part of the USG is still trying to destabilize the GVN, nearly 35 years after the war's end. These elements also viewed the nuns' activities as an anti-GVN protest. Tu noted that the land issue is a sensitive internal matter, particularly where the Catholic Church is concerned. Tu said that the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington would also bring this incident to the notice of the Department.

¶3. (SBU) We explained that the visit was prompted by a report that a nun had been manhandled at the site earlier in the day and the visit was informational only. Furthermore, we did not perceive the nuns' demonstration or the visit as anti-GVN acts. Tu elaborated that collecting information was not the problem, but that a perception of official U.S. support for a group of "anti-government protestors" was an extremely serious issue. He suggested that had the visit been conducted more discretely and not included interaction with the nuns, it would not have created a problem. Tu went on to say that the leadership elements angered by the visit had "fought against the U.S. before 1975." They view the United States differently than they view any other country and thus hold it to a different standard.

¶4. (SBU) Continuing to read from a long set of points that he said "came from Hanoi," Tu said that the "highest leadership" is particularly incensed that USG officials continue to meet with "persons opposed to the central government," whereas the Vietnamese Government "had never met with any persons inside the United States opposed to the U.S. government." He asserted that the USG seems intent on hearing "only one side" of the story in Vietnam, the anti-GVN side.

¶5. (SBU) A/CG stated that U.S. consular officials are tasked with reporting to Washington on the full range of issues - social, economic, and political - that bear on the bilateral relationship. To that end they collect information from a wide variety of sources. This allows the consulate to report with accuracy to Washington what is really happening in Vietnam rather than relying on sources outside Vietnam who assert, often without foundation, that the GVN is misbehaving or mistreating its own citizens. She reiterated the innocent nature of the incident in question. At the same time, she observed that, as indicated by the Vietnamese protest, all USG officials in Vietnam obviously are being monitored at all times. Therefore, we must assume that all our actions could be misinterpreted at any time. We will continue both to do our jobs in accordance with USG policy and show respect for Vietnamese sovereignty and the furtherance of bilateral relations.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: With the rapid growth of Vietnam's economy, the far-reaching changes in Vietnamese society, and the substantial ongoing improvement in the bilateral relationship, it is easy to forget the surreal degree to which some in the GVN evaluate our actions for unimagined symbolic meanings. We are hard-pressed to identify many other countries where this minor event would have provoked such a strong reaction. This is a warning that we are under the microscope and that small unintentional missteps can lead to major misperceptions. It is also interesting how the ERO characterized those intent on protesting the action. They all but used the term "hardliner" and made it clear that they were speaking under instruction "from Hanoi." End Comment.

¶7. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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